



Gaza media safety

ASSESSMENT

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The Gaza Strip



Contents

Introduction. 4

Context. 5

Background 7

The media situation - challenges and threats. .8

Conclusion 12

References 13

Introduction

This assessment describes the challenges media workers in Gaza were faced with in the wake of the military offensive, launched on 27 December 2008 by Israeli security forces, against Hamas in the Palestinian Gaza Strip.

The report is based on desk studies and telephone interviews with media workers covering the conflict from both sides of the Gaza border. Important contributions for the assessment were provided by executive director Khaled Abu Aker, AMIN Media Network and correspondent Ana Carbajosa, El Pais, Jerusalem. Palestinian Journalists Syndicate in Gaza, International Federation of Journalists, International News Safety Institute, Reporters Without Borders and Article 19 also provided valuable information for the assessment.

The aim of the assessment, produced and published by International Media Support, is to establish an overview of the media situation and the challenges and dangers facing the journalists and photographers who covered the conflict.

On the basis of this assessment, a strategy for rapid interventions in support of media workers in and around Gaza will be formed in consultation and cooperation with national and international media organizations.

Context

During the military offensive against Gaza, the largest military operation by Israeli forces in Palestinian Territories since 1967, space for reporting from the conflict became a crucial issue and subject to deep concern.

The situation saw its immediate culmination on Thursday 15 January, when a media centre in Gaza City housing a number of international news organizations, among them Reuters, NBC, Fox News, Sky News, Al-Arabiya and Abu Dhabi TV, was hit, injuring two journalists from Abu Dhabi Television.

According to Palestinian Journalists Syndicate in Gaza, four media workers were killed and up to 15 seriously injured since the military offensive was launched on 27 December 2008.

In what has been called by IFJ a dangerous violation of press freedom, adding to ignorance, uncertainty and fear in the region, Israel imposed on 27 December a ban on foreign journalists entering Gaza to cover the conflict. Two months before the ban, Israel restricted access to Gaza for foreign journalist, whereas Israeli journalists have been denied access to Gaza since October 2006.

On 28 December, Israeli fighter planes destroyed the offices of Al Aqsa Television. The studio building was destroyed and one cameraman was injured, according to IFJ.

One day later, a photographer with the Shehab News Agency died of wounds sustained in an air attack two weeks earlier.

On 5 January, Israeli forces allegedly attacked vehicles inside Gaza carrying "Press" or "TV" markings. At the same time, one cameraman was injured. According to the Palestine Journalists Syndicate, a reporter for Al-Alam television and his producer were arrested and detained.

On 6 January, a cameraman working for Algerian TV network ENTV and the Palestine Broadcast Production Company, died from wounds inflicted during an Israeli air strike on 27 December.

Two days later, a cameraman working for the Palestinian Broadcast Corporation in Gaza was killed with his wife and mother in law, when their home in Gaza City was shelled.

A journalist working for a local radio station in the Gaza Strip was killed on 9 January after his house was hit by fire from an Israeli tank. The house of another local journalist was also hit. At the same time, the al-Johara tower, housing some 20 media and production studios, was hit by Israeli rocket fire, injuring two journalists and putting all organizations out of action.

On 13 January, two journalists working for Al-Alam TV in Ramallah were indicted for reporting on the deployment of Israeli soldiers into Gaza without clearance from the Israeli authorities.

According to IFJ, the "systematic manipulation and control of media trying to report on Gaza" and the "unprecedented and deliberate attacks on media" is

a serious violation of international law which requires a concerted response from the world's media.

And according to Article 19, the ban on foreign media entering the Gaza Strip and the severe attacks on media personnel in Gaza is evidence of the determined attempts by the Israeli authorities to control and manage the news coming out of Gaza preventing important circulation of essential information on the plight of those most in need.

Sources: Palestinian Journalists Syndicate in Gaza, International Federation of Journalists, International News Safety Institute, Reporters without Borders and Article 19.

Background

The Gaza Strip is home to some 1.5 million Palestinians – of whom three-quarters are registered with the United Nations as refugees. The Gaza Strip is just 40 kilometers long and between six and 12 kilometers wide and has one of the highest population densities on earth.

Gaza is the stronghold of Hamas, which won the parliamentary elections in January 2006.

For many years, access to and exit from Gaza has been restricted. But in June 2007, the Israeli blockade was intensified as Hamas took control over Gaza after ousting the forces of Fatah. The aim was to isolate Hamas and keep it from firing short-range rockets over the border into nearby Israeli towns.

The blockade reduced to less than a quarter the volume of imported supplies compared to the level of December 2005 hence paralyzing the economy.

In June 2008, Hamas and Israel agreed to a six month ceasefire, brokered by Egypt. However, although reduced, rocket fire from Gaza into Israel continued in the first few months of the ceasefire. In November 2008, Israeli forces carried out an attack inside Gaza with Hamas retaliating with further fire.

On December 17, militants fired 19 rockets into Israel, according to Israeli military sources and on 18 December, Hamas ended the cease-fire claiming that Israel had broken the truce by failing to lift the blockade. On 27 December, Israel launched 30 missiles on Gaza City in the largest military operation by Israeli forces in the Palestinian Territories since 1967.

A ceasefire was called on 17 January by Israel – Hamas later declared its own truce. Hamas has demanded that Israel withdraws its forces from the Gaza Strip within one week.

According to Palestinian medical sources, at least 1,300 Palestinians have been killed and 5,500 injured during the conflict. 13 Israelis have been killed.

The United Nations warns that it will cost billions of dollars to rebuild the Gaza Strip, where tens of thousands have been left homeless and 400,000 have no running water.

Sources: BBC, Reuters, UN and others.

The media situation – challenges and threats

Omeyma Abu Khair, 44 year old freelance journalist working for Al Jazeera in Gaza accounts:

“Before the war, I lived with my mother in a house in Jabalia in the northern part of Gaza. The area was one of the hottest spots during the war and the village we lived in was completely erased. I was lucky to escape with my family.

We fled to an apartment south of Gaza City, where we were 15 people cramped together. All sleeping in the kitchen, since it was the only room in the apartment without windows and therefore believed to be the most secure. We had no electricity and there was a severe shortage of drinking water.

From day one, I was not able to work. It has been too dangerous for me to leave the apartment. And if I did leave the apartment, I did not know, if I was able to come back. My mother is sick and I am her sole provider. I could therefore not leave her.

But even in the apartment we were not safe. One day, a bullet was fired through our window hitting the wall behind. That was when we decided to move into the kitchen.

The Israelis have deliberately targeted journalists. Their houses have been destroyed. Israel claims that this is not the case. But you will see streets full of apartment buildings where only those housing journalists were hit.

I was contacted by Al Jazeera. They wanted me to do a piece on the bombing of the UN school. But I had to say no. I may lose my work now. But losing your work is one thing. Losing your life is different. And honestly, my family and I are in a much better situation than so many others. We have suffered no casualties in our close family. Since December, hundreds have been killed and whole families have been erased.”

The recent military offensive by Israeli security forces against Hamas in the Palestinian Gaza Strip and the consequent Israeli actions against media has sparked international concern.

The International Federation of Journalists has announced that it will organize an investigation into the attacks on media workers and houses, to assess whether there have been violations of international law and of Security Council resolution 1738 which provides protection of journalists and media personnel in conflict zones.

According to IFJ, the attacks have been “unprecedented and deliberate” and are “irrefutable proof that Israel pursues a clear strategy of intimidating the world media, including by wilfully killing and injuring journalists, into desisting from reporting independently on the conflict.”

Sakher Abou El Oun is working as a journalist for the international news agency AFP and he is president of the Palestinian Syndicate of Journalists in Gaza. Of the 22 years, he has been working for AFP covering numerous wars and conflicts in the regions, this is by far the worst war he has ever covered.

“The situation has been extremely dangerous because the Israelis have made no difference between civilians, journalists or armed people. A lot of journalists have been put in an very difficult position where in order not to loose their job they risked to loose their lives,” says Sakher Abou El Oun.

Working for an international news agency, Sakher Abou El Oun has been provided with essential safety equipment to carry out his work. He travels in an armored car and he wears a bulletproof vest. He has attended several safety trainings in the region. But most of his colleagues have never attended any safety training and they do not possess the basic protection gear. They are freelancers and have no international bureau to provide for them.

There are about 800 journalists in the Gaza Strip, according to Sakher Abou El Oun. Only about 100 of them are permanent staff. The rest of them are freelancers. For Sakher Abou El Oun, the challenge for the Palestinian Syndicate of Journalists in Gaza is to secure proper working conditions for the freelancers, ensure them access to safety training, safety equipment and insurance.

But even those journalists who have carried bulletproof vests and driven armored cars have reduced their movements to an absolute minimum, underlines Sakher Abou El Oun.

“Even if we have put TV or Press signs on our cars or our vests have carried clear signs that we were media, it has not been respected. There has been no protection, even from the people fighting on the ground. Everyday from around 4 pm, the streets have been completely deserted. After that you are too easy a target, so nobody was moving around after that,” says Sakher Abou El Oun.

The ban on foreign journalists from entering Gaza to cover the offensive, issued on 27 December, prevented international media professionals from covering the conflict and its humanitarian consequences. The territory remained completely closed throughout the entire offensive. Three types of journalists were able to operate in Gaza, according to the AMIN Media Network.

The first type was those working for international media organizations, such as Al Jazeera, Reuters and Associated Press. These journalists do have their safety needs met by their respective media outlets.

The second type is freelance journalists working for different Arab and Western media outlets. Being freelancers, they are not provided with the security-related equipment they are in need of.

The third type is local media outlet journalists, who have no security equipments whatsoever. This is due to the fact that local media outlets are incapable of providing their journalists with any such safety equipment and tools.

Adding to their vulnerability, the vast majority of freelancers and those working for local media outlets do not have any kind of insurance that would grant them or their families some kind of compensation in case they got injured or lost their lives. Insurance is such a critical and important issue for local reporters and freelancers in particular.

Mohammad Abu Sharkh is a freelance journalist and coordinator for AMIN in Gaza. He describes the working conditions journalists were subject to as hectic, dangerous and unbearable. Journalists have been under tremendous work pressure. However, they have strived to travel and remain in teams at all times. First and foremost for safety reasons, but also due to shortage of fuel.

Muhsin Al-Ifranji is a reporter for Al-Quds daily newspaper and a lecturer at the Media Department of the Islamic University of Gaza. He reports how risky it is to go to the field for news coverage, due to the absence of any protection for media professionals, and complains of the lack of safety equipment provided for journalists. He moves and works in groups in order to be easily identified as journalist by the Israeli troops.

"It's such a tough and stressful task. My wife is always worried about me. She realizes that there's nowhere safe in Gaza. She keeps calling me every now and then to make sure I am alright. And when I am out working on the field, my kids' image keeps striking my mind, and I keep thinking of how their lives would end up if I get killed or injured. It's an unbearable stressful situation we're living here."

"No safety, random attacks and bombings, tens of casualties among journalists." This is the way, Ali Al-Agha, freelance journalist for several media outlets in Gaza, describes his working conditions. Allegedly, he was forced to flee his offices together with his colleagues.

Avi Issacharof has worked as a journalist at the daily newspaper Haaretz in Tel Aviv for 8 ½ years. He covers the Palestinian territories and has also covered the recent offensive. But since October 2006, he has not been able to enter Gaza.

"Reporting on a conflict from the far is almost impossible. You cannot really report on something that you cannot see with your own eyes. The consequence is that you never get the full picture," says Avi Issacharof.

Also international journalists have been prevented from entering Gaza. On 27 December, Israel imposed a ban on foreign journalists from accessing Gaza to cover the conflict. But already two months before the ban, Israel restricted access to Gaza for foreign journalist.

This has forced international correspondents, among them Steen Nørskov from Denmark's Radio and Steffen Jensen, TV2, to cover the events by proxy.

"This is rendering the Israeli ban even more absurd, because images and news continued to pour out regardless of the ban," underlines Steen Nørskov.

There is a consensus among journalists based outside Gaza that the Israeli military offensive against the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip has been among the worst-covered wars in recent history.

This crucial limitation has been problematic not only in principle – violating core notions of freedom of the press and freedom of expression – but it also has had a direct impact on the news written or broadcast about the conflict.

Journalists in Jerusalem have over the past weeks had two options: either to stay in Jerusalem or to station themselves on the Israel-Gaza border to report from there. Neither option is satisfactory, and both make it very difficult for correspondents to present a balanced picture of what is happening inside Gaza.

Newspapers and radio correspondents staying in Jerusalem have complained of limited access to information released by the Israeli army or by Hamas. Due to the ban, there has been no access to Hamas officials. It has been almost impossible to reach them even by telephone. There is a similar issue with talking to Gaza residents in general. In the first days of the military offensive, it was relatively easy to talk to Palestinian civilians and analysts in Gaza by telephone to collect some information from inside the territory.

But as the offensive escalated and the days passed, electricity became increasingly scarce, preventing many residents from recharging their mobile phones. Further, the Israeli bombardments had hit the telecommunications infrastructure, forcing the network to collapse periodically. The contact with the Gaza residents has therefore also been restricted.

The lack of access to a variety of sources became particularly acute when it came to estimating the number of civilians killed in the attacks. Few independent organizations had people on the ground to evaluate the situation, and with the journalists out of the picture, the numbers of killed and injured had to be based almost exclusively on Palestinian medical sources.

Conclusion

Lack of safety and basic protection for media workers in Gaza – and in particular for journalists and photographers working freelance – has been identified as the most crucial and imminent issue in the weeks following the military offensive by Israel against Hamas in the Gaza Strip on 27 December 2008 and the ceasefire called on 17 January 2009.

The lack of basic equipment, as well as proper training in safety issues, has prevented journalists from moving freely and thus prevented them from performing their task at the expense of the circulation of essential information.

Summing up, freelance journalist Omeyma Abu Khair states:

“We need organisations that really takes care of journalists – of the individual journalist and photographer. We have no such organisations here. We need help to learn, how to work under pressure. How to operate during war. How to protect ourselves when we are out reporting. We need psychological support to teach us how to work in long term trauma situations. How to deal with our own traumas. And how to take care of our families when we are working 24 hours a day.”

International Media Support is part of a mission that will travel to Gaza on 22 January to further assess the needs and to prepare a rapid intervention in support media workers in Gaza.

The mission is led by International Federation of Journalists.

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